

CITY OF BALTIMORE

MARTIN O'MALLEY, Mayor



HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HEALTH DEPARTMENT INTRODUCES NEW TESTING TOOL

BALTIMORE, MD (July 11, 2006) – The Baltimore City Health Department is announcing a new initiative to make RNA-based-based tests for HIV infection available to all city residents. The initiative is known as Supporting **HIV** Intervention with **Early Lab** Detections (SHIELD).

Standard HIV tests measure antibody levels, which represent the body's response to HIV infection. These tests can be negative for the first several weeks to months after HIV infection (the "window period").

The new HIV tests identify RNA, the genetic material of HIV itself. These tests turn positive within days of HIV infection.

"This new technology puts Baltimore at the cutting edge of HIV detection and prevention," said Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, Commissioner of Health. "City residents can now better understand their HIV status and move quickly to protect those they love from infection."

The new testing is based on a model pioneered in North Carolina. A 2005 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that RNA-based-based testing was safe and effective and helped protect dozens of people from imminent exposure to HIV.

Under the new initiative, the Health Department will employ the RNA-based test for patients whose antibody tests are negative. A positive result will therefore mean that the patient has contracted HIV recently.

Dr. Kima J. Taylor, assistant commissioner for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, stated, "When a patient learns that he or she has HIV, risky behavior often decreases immediately. By identifying infections early, when viral levels are at or near their peak, the new test will prevent additional infections. As a public health tool, the new test will allow the Health Department to improve outreach efforts to specific high-risk areas in our communities."

Baltimore is one of the first cities in the country to utilize RNA-based-based testing. The initiative is supported by \$320,000 in city general revenues, proposed by the Mayor and approved by the Baltimore City Council in the fiscal year 2007 budget.

"I am very pleased that Baltimore is offering this important service to city residents," said Sheila Dixon, President of the Baltimore City Council. "Knowledge is power, and I encourage all city residents at risk for HIV to get tested and receive counseling on how they can protect themselves and others. I even encourage those who may not think they are at risk to get tested and counseled."

The Baltimore City laboratory began offering the new tests to patients at the Health Department's STD clinics on June 16. The next phases of implementation will expand testing to the Health Department's mobile outreach and testing done by affiliated community based organizations.

Later this fall, the Health Department will implement a new partnership with community based organizations to use the information from the new tests to prevent HIV in the city. This effort has also been funded with city general funds by the Mayor and City Council.

To access the new test, city residents can come to the Druid STD Clinic on 1515 W. North Avenue or the Eastern STD Clinic on 620 North Caroline Street during the hours of 8:30-4:00 on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, and 8:30-12 on Thursdays.

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